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March 24, 2009 in [missives from academia](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [3 comments](#)

(In 75 minutes)

It's no small task to sum up the work of 53 separate authors but I gave it a go last Friday at the [Virginia Festival of the Book](#) when I spoke about [China in 2008](#). I shared the stage (and live C-Span connection) with Susan Brownell (who gave a fascinating presentation on the [Beijing Olympics](#) and Olympic education in the Chinese schools) and our moderator, UVA professor of politics [Brantly Womack](#). The session turned into a lively discussion with the audience of about 45 about how we can find ways to more accurately represent (and then hopefully understand) China in the U.S. Here's a quick list to give you a sense of some of the issues that the audience raised (and since I don't have access to the C-Span broadcast, I'm going to have to wing it from memory).



Action shot, before the panel started

1. *Best question on the Chinese internet: "I thought China was a closed society. But you seem to be describing a different kind of media environment. Can you give some more examples of that?"*

It's easy to forget, living in a little blog bubble, that not everyone is keeping up with the excitement and subterfuge of the Chinese internet. I referenced [China's Censorship 2.0](#) by Rebecca MacKinnon as evidence of how patchwork internet censorship is in China. But this question is also a reminder that the media's emphasis on the "Great Firewall" has skewed general understanding of China's media environment as a blackout zone.

2. *Most complicated question: "The picture of China you are presenting doesn't seem much like what I read in the news. Why is that?"*

This is a toughie. There is a lot of great reporting and writing on China, but unfortunately there's crummy stuff too. And in a world of soundbites it's easy for the story to be reduced to "China: Bad." As I reiterated at the panel, the most important thing is to try to understand China as it is, not as we expect it will be or as we hope it will be. And we should understand China as just as complicated and

diverse (if not more so) than the U.S.—when you hear someone talking about “the Chinese believe this” or “the Chinese do that” it’s a red flag that you’re not getting the full story.

3. *Most fun question to contemplate answers to: “I’m about to take a trip to China. What should I read?”*

This question was asked after the panel had ended and I recommended taking a gander through China Beat and several other blogs as well as (since the asker was headed to Beijing, among other places) Michael Meyer’s *Last Days of Old Beijing*. Of course there are a lot of other options—I’m curious to hear what you all recommend to your China-bound friends, so feel free to leave comments to that effect.

4. *Question I couldn’t answer, but have since fished up a little info about: “How is China addressing disabilities like dyslexia?”*

My immediate thought was, “Is it possible to be dyslexic when reading Chinese characters?” I clearly needed a little educating on this topic. The answer is: yes, but dyslexia rates are [lower in China](#) (and Japan) than in the U.S. Interestingly, recent studies have found that the neurological abnormalities that make English readers dyslexic are [different from those that make Chinese readers dyslexic](#).

Perhaps some readers have more information on how dyslexia is addressed in Chinese schools.

5. *Questions I was expecting (but wasn’t asked): What’s up with China pestering our spy boats? How is the economic downturn affecting China? Why doesn’t China want Coke to make their apple juice?*

I thought one of these questions might pop up. But this well-read crowd wanted to talk meta-questions—how China is represented in the media and why. In terms of events-related questions, though, I did get a follow-up about the winter 2008 ice storms, which some in the crowd did not remember. Brantly Womack jumped in with solid info, holding up his cup to show how thick the ice was on the powerlines and saying, “If this storm had happened here, we’d still be talking about it.” It was a good example of how to bring the foreign home.



L to R: Susan Brownell, Brantly Womack, Kate Merkel-Hess